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SUBJECT: LAW ADVISOR SAYS MILITARY DOES NOT WANT TO STAY
LONG

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary. According to the government's Law Adviser, the three military service chiefs are anxious about their role behind the throne and do not wish to overstay their welcome. There are differences, he said, between the military and the civilian advisers on press controls and whether to grant bail to corruption suspects. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On January 28, Ambassador and Resident Legal Adviser (notetaker) met with Mainul Hossein, the Caretaker Government adviser for the Ministries of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs; Housing and Public Works; Land; and Information.

13. (C) Ambassador stressed the importance of government respect for civil liberties and press freedom as it pursues its anti-corruption drive and arrangements for holding free and fair elections. Hossein replied that the advisers are well aware they are un-elected and that their fate depends on cooperation from all sides. Their main objective, he said, is to hold elections that meet popular desires for a free, fair, and credible process to prevent a return to politics as usual. The political parties, he stated, "do not believe in democracy but only in power and money."

14. (C) According to Hossein, on January 27 he and other advisers met with the three military service chiefs who made it clear they are anxious about their role in government. The chiefs, he said, feels they have staked their personal reputations and that of the military on the outcome of the new government and want to return to the barracks. When the Ambassador expressed concern at the arrest of 15,000 people and the reported custodial deaths since the state of emergency was invoked, Hossein acknowledged some abuses may have occurred but were being addressed. The chiefs, he asserted, have no partisan political agenda or desire to remain in government longer than necessary.

15. (C) The Ambassador also raised concerns about the curbs on press freedom, including the recent seizure at the airport of The Economist, which included an article about the military. Hossein stated he did not know about this case, but the new rules are "guidance" and actual circumstances will dictate the level of enforcement. Why, he asked, referring to The Daily Star, should a paper be allowed to allege the government has lost its vision and thereby damage Bangladesh's international image? Ambassador responded that such "guidance" would lead to self-censorship, have a "chilling effect" on public discourse, and attract criticism by the international community.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador opined that the Caretaker Government is enjoying a honeymoon period, in part because of the popularity of its anti-corruption stance. She warned, however, that the longer the government stays in power, the greater the chance of people losing confidence in its agenda. Hossein responded that the government is thinking about long-term reforms for the good of the country, but he rejected the idea of a honeymoon period. "We are having a hard time among ourselves," he said, with differences between the military and the civilians over the extent of press controls and whether bail should be granted to corruption suspects.

¶7. (C) Comment: Hossein was exceptionally frank in acknowledging the military's leading role in government affairs, but also exceptional in arguing that the military is anxious to return to the barracks. Other advisers, including Chief Adviser Ahmed (septel), studiously avoid mentioning the "m" word (military) and stress the need for long-term reforms as a precondition for meaningful elections. The extent of actual differences between the military and the civilians is unclear but bears careful watching.
BUTENIS